

Nature of the Orthodox Religious Education in Finland according to Curricula in Basic Education

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Abstract

Religious education (RE) in Finland is a compulsory subject, organized according to major denomination of the pupils in a municipal area. It is called "School's general religious education" and is open for everyone with some exceptions. More than 90 % of the pupils at Finnish schools follow these lessons. At the end of the 1960's and beginning of the 1970's two big educational renewals took place in Finland. Despite the renewals of the curriculum for comprehensive education in the 1980s the role and nature of the RE in schools faced quite few changes. Still the RE was confessional and church centred but the church were not directly involved in curricula issues or in compiling the Religious Education curricula or textbooks. The curriculum for comprehensive education in 1994 brought a radical change to the meaning and philosophy of curricula in RE. In the National Core Curricula for Basic Education (NCCBE) in 2004, the role and nature of Religious Education changed from "confessional Religious Education" into "Religious Education in accordance with pupils' own religion". First time ever there was given to all religions, Christian and none, the general and shared objectives and contents. The pupils are encouraged in personal reflection on ethical questions. RE instruction supports the pupils' self-knowledge, self-appreciation and to help them build and evaluate his/her identity and worldview. The advocates for a one lesson of "worldviews" are arguing that children in the classroom should have more opportunities for dialogue with people from different religions, both Christian and non-Christian. At schools, we aim to educate pupils in accordance to their own religion to value and respect their own heritage. This means that in the comprehensive education there is no space for the one and same content-based religion lesson for all pupils.

Keywords: Orthodox Religious Education, Finland, Curricula

1. Religious landscape in Finland

Finland, as all Scandinavian countries, is a protestant country. For the moment most of the population of 5, 4 million people belong to the Evangelical Lutheran Church (70.14 %). The amount is slightly decreasing. The Orthodox Church has about 60.000 members (1.1 % of the population) and the number is slightly increasing due to immigrants and refugees from countries of Orthodox tradition. The Roman Catholic Church has about 15,000 members. Protestant denominations such as example Baptists, Methodists, the Salvation Army and Adventists have a total number of member that remains under 1% of the Finland's population. In addition, the number of Jews is about 1,300 (Suomen virallinen tilasto, 2017). It is significant that due to immigrants and refugees the number of Muslims is increasing. At the end of 2017, it was estimated that there were about 70.000 Muslims, who are mainly staying in Southern-Finland. (There are no official statistical numbers of Muslims in Finland, because most of the Muslims are not signed up to an Islamic community). Nowadays it is very characteristic that for different reasons people are resigning themselves from the membership of the Lutheran church.

Each year ca. 2 % are opting out of the membership. Every 4th person of the population is not signed up to any religious organisation

(http://www.stat.fi/tup/suoluk/suoluk_vaesto.html#vaestorakenne).

2. The guidelines for Religious Education in Finland

The main way to get religious education (RE) in Finland is compulsory education in public schools. Religious education is a *compulsory subject* in both comprehensive schools (7-16 years) and in senior/upper secondary schools (16-18/19 years). In vocational education there is no actual instruction in Religious Education (NCCBE, 2004). It is organized according to the major denomination of the pupils in a municipal area. In practice, this means Evangelical Lutheran religion. However, as a subject, it is called "School's general religious education", not a Lutheran one. One interesting remark is that school's general RE is open for everyone with some exceptions and more than 90 % of the pupils at Finnish schools follow these lessons. This means that about 20% of the Finnish people belong to the Lutheran Church.

The status of Orthodox instruction differs from other religious minorities. To a minimum of three Orthodox pupils in municipality schools or in a school of other organizer of education, instruction has to be provided automatically. The parents' don't have to request it. Parents or guardians of other minorities are advised to request RE instruction for their children if the condition of the minimum is fulfilled. A membership of a religion registered in Finland has, as a precondition, to make that application (Law for Basic Education 2003). The National Board of Education accepts the curricula for 5 religions including Christians and none. The religions are the evangelical-lutheran, orthodox and roman catholic. Non-Christian religions are Islam and Judaism. In the previous curriculum 2004 there were syllabus for 13 religions (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014).

Since 1985 there is organized a separate lesson for the pupils who are not members of any religious denomination. The lesson is called Life Stance Education (Ethics) to encourage pupils in creating their own worldview (<https://et-opetus.fi/>).

The state is neutral regarding religions and churches. Churches are not directly involved in curricula issues or in compiling the Religious Education curricula or textbooks. There are usually Religious Education teachers (denominational representatives) from different school levels and the group is led by a representative from the National Board of Education.

The curricula development in RE– from christianization to general education

First Curricula for Religious education in 1925– Not for the Orthodox RE

Since the first curriculum for compulsory school in 1925 (Rural Public School Curriculum) the tasks and nature of religious education (RE) has been almost stable until 1970s in the Finnish educational system. In that curriculum the most characteristic nature of RE was the "Christianization" of the pupils. It was totally confessional and based on a Lutheran doctrine (Maalaiskansakoulun opetuskomitea, 1925). The curricula had a school specific character, not a national one.

The years after world war II in 1940s did not change a lot the objectives of the RE. The tendency was to emphasize less the indoctrination in Christianity and not to do the catechetical work of the church at school. Saine states (2000, 211) that still the basis in RE was catechism and confessionalism based on a Christian Lutheran doctrine.

The purpose of RE in 1940s and 1950s was to promote children's religious development based on their parents' (Lutheran) denomination (Kähkönen 1976).

Hence the society did not offer basis for the Orthodox religious education (ORE) at schools to the members of the Orthodox Church, the church herself and the teachers themselves were active with this since the 1920's. The church made a curriculum and teaching materials for the Rural Public School. Almost ten years later the Ministry of Education officially accepted that curriculum to be used at schools, but in practice it was not applied. Furthermore, during the decades since the 1920's until the 1970's the Orthodox Church was very active with the RE issues, but the Ministry of Education was not co-operative with those curricula proposals. For example, in the 1930's the reason to reject the church's proposal was that "in each school there is the school's own RE program, not a national one". In 1946 the Committee's curriculum report for Rural Public School did not mention the ORE at all. It can be summarized that the Orthodox churches and teacher organizations active work during the 1950's and the 1960's for the religious education issues for the comprehensive education paved the way to rise the Orthodox religious education to the equal position with the Lutheran one in the 1970's in the Basic School system (Aikonen 1998).

Concerning the ORE in Rural Public School, between 1925 and 1970, two things must be pointed out. First, even though for decades there were no official curricula for the ORE in Rural Public School, the ORE was offered in schools by applying the unofficial programs. Second thing is that the Orthodox Church has not been directly involved in the religious educational issues in public schools. It has not offered RE at public schools as a church. There has been and there are priests working as a RE teacher, but they work in a role of a RE teacher in a public-school system, not representatives of an Orthodox Church.

2.1 Educational system renewal in the 1970's gave space to bring up "active members of Orthodox congregations"

At the end of the 1960's and beginning of the 1970's two big educational renewals took place in Finland. The question was about launching the so called Basic school system from the beginning of 1970s with 9 grades for children between 7 to 15 years (Peruskoulun opetussuunnitelma komitean mietintö I: opetussuunnitelman perusteet, 1970). At the same time there was a strong opinion to change Christian education into secular humanistic education; ethics and history/science of religion (Kähkönen, 1976). Despite of that strong anti-religious debate, RE remained in the educational system based on confessionalism (Kähkönen, 1976). Along to the educational school system renewal in the 1970's, the first separated curricula for compulsory education in the Orthodox religious instruction was introduced. Before that the ORE "should follow, when applicable, the Lutheran curricula" (Peruskoulun opetussuunnitelma komitean mietintö II: oppiaineiden opetussuunnitelmat, 1970).

2.2 Curriculum in 1985 – society orientation comes up in RE

Despite the renewals of the curriculum for comprehensive education in the 1980s the role and nature of the RE in schools faced quite few changes (Saine 2000). One of the clear phenomena was that tendency in RE in the 1980's started to be more society oriented and paying attention to the general objectives of the school education. Still the RE was confessional and church centred. For example, 4/7 of the objectives of the

LRE were addressed to the topics of the Bible and teachings of their own church. Two of the objectives had a nature of the Ethics and one was set to consider other religions – Christian and none. The objectives of the ORE were even more church orientated and centred, because one purpose of RE was to “bring up active members of a congregation”. The objectives of ORE emphasized more ethical topics and to face dissimilarity than the Lutheran ones as well (Kouluhallitus, 1985).

2.3 First step to change the nature of RE at schools in curriculum 1994

Despite of the renewals of the curriculum for comprehensive education in the 1980's and 1990's the role and nature of the RE in school faced quite few changes (Pyysiäinen, 1998). Tendency in RE in 1980s started being more society-oriented in Lutheran education and paid attention to the general objectives of the school education. The objectives of the ORE were church orientated and centred, because one purpose of ORE was still to “bring up active members of a congregation”. The objectives of ORE emphasized more ethical topics and how to face dissimilarity than the Lutheran ones (Kouluhallitus 1985). The curriculum for comprehensive education in 1994 brought a radical change to the meaning and philosophy of curricula in RE. It was not that much normative as the previous ones and gave a lot of space to schools to make their own curricula for RE. Compared to the previous curricula there was first time ever both general, common objectives for different religions. In addition to that, each denomination made its own confessional contents and learning objectives (Opetushallitus, 1994). This was the first step to change RE to examine religions outside of itself and at a general level even though teaching was based on a confession.

2.4 No more confessional curricula – new phase started in 2004

The new Act for Religious Freedom (2003) changed a character of RE at schools. In the National Core Curricula for Basic Education (NCCBE) in 2004, the role and nature of Religious Education changed for the first time ever from “confessional Religious Education” into “Religious Education in accordance with pupils' own religion” (National Core Curricula for Basic Education 2004). Also, a teacher doesn't need to share anymore the same religious denomination with the pupils or students and with what she/he is teaching about (Regulation for Qualified Teachers in Education, 2003). Honkaheimo and Luodeslampi (2006) write, that the term “confessional” indicates the knowledge-based content of education. It can be pointed out from the previous curricula, that except the contents, the goals also have been confessional - to teach and learn a religion and its tradition (Honkaheimon & Luodeslampi, 2006).

The National Board of Education gave guidelines for Religious Education based on the Act for Religious Freedom (2003). This states that practice of religion is forbidden in a school class (e.g., praying or having religious ceremonies). It must be pointed out, to avoid any wrong conceptions, that not even before the renewals of curricula and Act for Religious Freedom the religious education lessons were not based on practicing religion. One exception is when it is associated with pedagogy as in Orthodox education. Based on this, the icons, hymns and prayers are supporting and illustrating the core contents. In addition, the Orthodox and the pupils from other minorities were at least theoretically getting now their own classes. Pupils without any religious affiliation had also their own lessons in Life Stance Education (Ethics). According to the Curricula for other Minorities 2006 (Perusopetuksen

muidenuskontojenopetussuunnitelmien perusteet, 2006) in comprehensive education those are Roman Catholics, Adventists, Bahá'í, Lord's People Community, Islam, Judaism, Hare Krishna-movement, The Christian Community (Steiner based religion), Free Church and Mormons.

When comparing the objectives in LRE and ORE it is obvious that last mentioned RE is more focused on applying the instruction according to the pupil's own religion. In the objectives is stated, for example, that "the strengthening and maintenance of the pupil's Orthodox identity represents the primary concerns" (NCCBE 2004). LRE emphasize the role of RE from a cultural perspective but points out the meaning of a religion in general in humans and their personal life orientation (NCCBE 2004).

3. Curricula reformation in 2014 – New orientation for RE

The latest curricula renewal (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014, NCCBE) in the Finnish educational system was introduced at schools on 1st of August 2016. Education provides in municipalities have base their own local curricula on the national core curriculum.

In religious education the reformation was in some terms quite radical and was heading to a new orientation and philosophy of curricula in RE. First time ever there was given to all religions, Christian and none, the general and shared objectives and contents. Curricula for RE is for Lutheran religion, Orthodox religion, Catholic religion, Judaism and Islam. One has to remind that this did not and does not mean that there will be one religion lesson to be shared among the all denominations at schools. The purpose of those common objectives and contents is to make a framework to have these as the foundation for each religion's own objectives and contents. A nice thought, but unfortunately this paved a way of misinterpretation in the core nature of curricula in RE concerning the minor religions and the pupils of Ethics. This will be dealt with later on.

There was also another reform dealing with all school subjects in Basic education. According to the curriculum there are the so called seven transversal competences as a part of each subject (<https://www.oph.fi/download/190839>). Those are always included in teaching and assessed as part of the different subjects. Transversal competences are as follows: thinking and learning to learn, cultural competence & interaction and self-expression, taking care of oneself and managing daily life, multiliteracy, ICT competence, working life competence and entrepreneurship, participation & involvement and building a sustainable future.

In the NCCBE 2014 the grades have been grouped. The first group includes grades 1–2, then 3–6 and 7–9. For each group in RE, as in other subjects, there are tasks, objectives and key contents. The following statement deals with all the grades concerning RE in Basic education:

"In compliance with Section 13 of Basic Education Act, the instruction of religion is arranged in accordance with the pupil's religious community as the instruction of the pupil's own religion according to separate syllabi. To ensure the coherence of the subject, common objectives and content areas have been determined for all forms of instruction in the pupil's own religion. In the descriptions of the syllabi in different religions, the common content areas are specified in accordance with the nature of the pupil's own religion" (NCCBE 2014).

The *common task* of subject of religion in the Basic education for the grades 1–9

includes:

- to provide the pupils with an extensive general knowledge and ability regarding religion and worldviews
- in teaching and learning, the pupils get familiarized with the studied religion and its diversity
- to get acquainted with the traditions related to religions and worldviews in Finland as well as religions and worldviews elsewhere in the world
- to promote an understanding of the relationship between religion and culture as well as multiliteracy related to religions and worldviews
- to provide versatile information about religions and help the pupils understand religion-related discussions
- to guide towards critical thinking and the observation of religions and worldviews from different viewpoints
- to introduce the relationship between belief and knowledge as well as language, symbolism, and concepts characteristic of religions as are reflected in teaching and learning
- to support the pupils' ability to participate in the dialogue within and between religions and worldviews
- to encourage pupils to respect life, human dignity, and what they and others consider sacred

Also, among the tasks is to familiarize with ethical thinking in the studied religion and in other religions. In RE the pupils are encouraged in personal reflection on ethical questions. Throughout basic education the instruction supports the pupils' self-knowledge, self-appreciation, and the development of life management skills. The instruction supports the pupil to build and evaluate his or her identity as well as personal view of life and worldview and the pupil's growth into a responsible member of his or her community and the democratic society as well as a global citizen (NCCBE 2014).

For the grades 1–2 there are eight, for 3–6 twelve and for 7–9 there are ten objectives of instruction (NCCBE 2014). For each group of grades there are three key content areas. Those are the *pupil's relationship with his or her own religion* (C1), *the world of religions* (C2) and a *good life* (C3). The core character of these three syllabi components is that those have to be incorporated in each grade when compiling the curriculum for RE and the textbooks. In practice, it is against the spirit of the curriculum, if it is made so that for example the content good life comes to pupils not until the 6th grade. The overall nature of objectives and contents starts from the pupils' life circles such as his or her surrounding area with its phenomena and experiences related both to pupil's own religion and the other ones. In the Orthodox RE the starting point is to recognize and familiarize the elements in Orthodoxy, Christianity and other religions. During the later grades these will be extended and studied deeper and wider in a way of a spiral method.

Objectives of instruction in religion in grades 3–6

Objectives of instruction	Content areas related to the objectives	Transversal competences
O1 to guide the pupil to get acquainted with the holy books and legends of the studied religion and its key dogmas	C1	T1
O2 to guide the pupil to familiarise himself or herself with the rituals and customs of the studied religion and its sacred sites and buildings	C1	T1, T2
O3 to help the pupil to recognise the special features and symbolic nature of religious language	C1, C2	T2, T3, T4
O4 to guide the pupil to acquire, evaluate, and use information on religions from various sources	C1, C2, C3	T4, T5, T6
O5 to guide the pupil to familiarise himself or herself with the roots and current status of religions and worldviews in Finland and Europe	C1, C2	T1, T2
O6 to guide the pupil in becoming familiar with Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as well as their influence and history in Europe	C2, C3	T2
O7 to encourage the pupil to respect what he or she and others consider sacred and to behave appropriately in different religious ceremonies and situations	C1, C2, C3	T2, T5, T6
O8 to guide the pupil to become acquainted with the ethical teachings of the studied religion and the common ethical principles of different religions	C1, C2, C3	T7
O9 to guide the pupil to understand the inherent values of human rights and, in particular, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child from the perspective of the individual and the community	C2, C3	T2
O10 to guide the pupil to evaluate the choices he or she makes and to reflect on the values underlying his or her actions from the perspective of ethical principles and a sustainable future	C2, C3	T1, T3, T6
O11 to create opportunities for the pupil to discuss ethical questions, to express his or her thoughts and emotions constructively, and to practise justifying his or her views	C1, C2, C3	T1, T4, T6, T7
O12 to help and support the pupil in building and reinforcing a positive worldview as well as his or her self-esteem and trust in life	C3	T1

Table 1. Objectives of instruction in religion in grades 3–6

As mentioned before, in RE in addition of the shared tasks, objectives and key contents, there are also the equal religion specified paragraphs. These all previous mentioned make a framework to the pupil's own religious education. As an example, it can be introduced the task and key content areas in grades 3–6 for all religions and for the Orthodox religious education.

In grades 3–6 the task of religious education is focusing:

- to expand and deepen the pupils' basic knowledge of their own religion
- to learn about the holy books and legends of the studied religion
- to learn about studied religion's key dogmas, ethical principles, rituals and customs
- to encourage pupils to wonder and ask questions
- to make pupils get acquainted with the religious roots of Finland and Europe and religious or worldview-based life in modern-day Finland and Europe
- to develop pupil's media literacy and to guide to evaluate and use information found in different sources as well as to utilize it in different situations
- to explore in teaching and learning the rights of children and the individual's responsibility for his or her own actions

- to practice pupil's emotional and interaction skills, and to support in formulating and justifying their personal views
- to encourage the pupils in friendships, building a positive class and school community, and acting against discrimination (NCCBE 2014).

The following table (table 2) describes the common syllabi and the syllabi for Orthodox religion for grades 3–6. Those are clearly pointing out that different religions, as well as ORE, are applying the common syllabi when formulating their own ones highlighting its essential contents and teachings.

Key content	Common syllabi in Religion grades 3–6	Different syllabi in Orthodox Religion grades 3–6
C1	The contents focus on sources of religion, holy book, saints, as well as music, symbols and holy sites and buildings. The dogmas of the studied religion, its customs, rituals, and communities, and the internal diversity of the religion are also important in terms of the contents. The pupils study the key legends of the religion and their interaction with the arts, science and culture.	The instruction focuses on the sources and basic concepts of the Orthodox dogma. Key contents include the basic features of liturgical life, holy mysteries and church rituals for everyday life and celebrations. The pupils are familiarized with Old Testament books from the perspective of Orthodox teaching as well as with the life and teachings of Jesus in the Gospels and in the events of the church year. They study the birth of the church and the acts of Paul, the Apostle and other apostles. They learn about the characteristics of the Orthodox Church in Finland, the church as a religious building, church architecture, and the related symbolism. The instruction includes church music and art as well as the influence and media visibility of the Orthodox religion in Finland and in the world.
C2	The contents of instruction include Christianity, other religions, and irreligion in Finnish culture and daily life. In particular, the pupils familiarize themselves with religious communities in the local area of the school and their holy buildings. The background concerning religions and worldviews as well as the current status of religions and worldviews in Finland and	In teaching and learning, the pupils reflect on what holiness, celebrations, and different customs as well as respecting them mean both in their own culture and in the cultures of other religions. The character of the Orthodox Church as a catholic and apostolic, global community is discussed in teaching and learning. The pupils learn to know the major religions in Europe and the European map of religions. They get acquainted

	Europe are explored in teaching and learning. The contents are selected to give the pupils an overall picture of the religious roots of Europe and, in particular, the basic contents and significance of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Religious themes visible in the media and popular culture are taken into account in the selection of contents.	with features that Islam and Judaism have in common with Orthodox Christianity. The pupils learn about the religious communities in the local area of the school and irreligion as a worldview. The pupils are given a preliminary introduction to ecumenism and religious dialogue as well as to the relationship between human rights and religion.
C3	Key contents include human dignity, respect for life and protecting nature. The pupils reflect on their personal choices, the values underlying their actions, and global responsibility. Life skills, self-knowledge, and holistic well-being are also an important part of the contents. The pupils are familiarized with central ethical teachings of the studied religion and the ethical views that different religions and world views have in common. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is discussed in class. The pupils are provided with tools for ethical discussions and justifying their personal views as well as for discussions on religions.	Essential contents of the instruction include the role of the Orthodox Church's teaching and the message of the New Testament in guiding and supporting individuals when resolving ethical questions in their own lives and in interaction with others. The pupils familiarize themselves with the Ten Commandments and reflect on their personal ethical choices and the consequences ensuing from them, as well as their impacts on the development of self-knowledge, life skills, and a positive view of life. Teaching and learning include valuing other people, looking after the environment and nature, respecting life, and working for a sustainable future. The pupils reflect on global responsibility in the life of the church and the individual. They are given a preliminary introduction to the common features of the ethical teachings of different religions as well as the common features of the European human rights conception and Christian values. They also deepen their understanding of the significance of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Table 2. The common and Orthodox syllabi for grades 3–6 (NCCBE 2014)

4. Assessment in learning religion in NCCBE 2014

The curriculum renewal gave new ways for assessment in religion and other school subjects. There is given more space to a pupil. The self-evaluation is considered also in

exercise books. As well, peer assessment is included among the tools when getting feedback during the learning process. In the end of 6th grade there are assessment criteria for the good/numerical grade 8. (In Finland the numerical assessment scale is 4 – 10. In Basic education (grades 1 – 7) the assessment can be also in a written form. In grades 8 and 9 it is numeric). Those criteria are dealing with knowledge and skills based on the twelve objectives in instruction. A skill does not mean just behavioral aspects, but how to apply the knowledge. For example, when an objective for grades 3–6 is speaking about how to respect sacred and to behave appropriately in religious places and situations, the criteria is focused on pupil's knowledge how to act in those places and situations. This assessment target is the ethical reflection (NCCBE 2014).

The final assessment for religious education takes place at the end of 9th grade. On that grade there have to be a numerical assessment. The final assessment criteria for good knowledge and skills in religion are set, as previously, for the numerical grade 8. The assessment focuses, for example, on:

- perceiving the significance of religions in culture and the society
- mastering knowledge of religion
- knowledge of world religions and different worldviews
- literacy of religion and culture
- thinking and interaction skills
- knowledge on ethics and human rights ethics

For example, the assessment criteria for ethical thinking is dealing with pupil's ability reflect on the ethical dimensions of his or her own choices and to explain their influence on themselves and others and on sustainable development (NCCBE 2014). The criteria are meant to local assessment taking place at schools, because in Finland there are not national exams in religious education.

5. The Future for Religious Education in Finland

In recent five years there has been an active debate against the former RE and to reform the RE in Finland by some political and academic advocates having a lot of space in media. In many municipalities the school administrators and headmasters are echoing this and had made their own decisions (<https://suomenkuvalehti.fi/jutut/kotimaa/eri-uskonnot-ja-et-yhden-oppiaineen-alla-malli-toimii-jo-kulosaarella/>). A false and technical explanation was that "there are so much in common in religions and common contents in ethics" that we can teach all together and "give space to a dialogue" between worldviews. Also, so called "euro-explanation" has been in use due to the multicultural and multi-faith development in Finland. In fact, it is clearly shown that the costs are only 0.001 of the budgets for basic education in Finland.

It is also said that it is against children's free will "to force" them to join Religious Education lessons. At the same time this opposition forgets or ignores human rights and the Declaration of Children's Rights by the United Nations, which Finland has also ratified. That document clearly states the rights of each child in relation to spiritual and religious education.

These aspects and an illegal system to organize RE are violating school laws and are illegal in many ways. The main is that a pupil is prevented to follow the syllabus of his/her own religion and is not getting the education he/she is legitimated. It is also dealing with a teacher. In case of the Orthodox RE a qualified teacher has been removed and the students have been welded to a class of a non-qualified teacher. The

National Board of Education in Finland (NBE), which has the responsibility in RE issues, is strongly against these self-made and illegal solutions in RE at schools. The schools, which are practicing against the school laws explain these solutions as an "experiments", but NBE has neither received an application for those nor has given a permission (Interview NBC, 2018).

As mentioned above, the advocates for a one lesson of "world views" are arguing that children in the classroom should have more opportunities for dialogue with people from different religions, both Christian and non-Christian. It might be somewhat problematic to have dialogues if you don't even know the basics of your own religion, which is clearly the outcome of Science of Religion lessons. Who is a suitable teacher for these lessons? Is the Science of Religion neutral enough to deal with religions and values when taking into consideration the National Core Curriculum? The opponents of Religious Education also argued that it is the responsibility of the church or religious communities to take care of teaching a religion. They take no notice that it will open the gates for fundamentalism or extreme movements to fulfill the gap of Religious Education "according to one's religion." Because of this possibility the Religious Education will not be any more controlled by the society and this might cause instability.

Arguments in favor of the present system of Religious Education in Finland, are quite diverse. Among them it has been pointed out that Religious Education "in accordance with his or her own religion" helps to give immigrants or refugees coming to Finland the feeling of belonging, homelike and safety, if there is at least one link in school to their fatherland. It does not only affect the children, because through them, the parents, too, are involved. The operative system also helps to keep stable and peaceful the social structure and above all it is democratic for the minorities.

The values of European and Finnish people are deeply affected by Christian ethics. The culture and arts cannot be understood without having knowledge about the Bible, its teachings and other religions. Thus, there are cultural, historical, and ethical reasons that justify the place of religious education in schools. Since an important goal of the school system is to guide children to reflect on different views of life and their rationalization, religious education can be justified as providing a unique perspective on many questions that deal with basic human issues (Puolimatka & Tirri, 2000). At schools, we aim to educate pupils in accordance to their own religion to value and respect their own heritage by applying the spirit of the golden rule taught by Jesus Christ in the challenging multicultural world. A Finnish proverb says: "Know yourself and respect your neighbor". In practice this means that in the comprehensive education there is no space for the one and same content-based religion lesson for all pupils.

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